



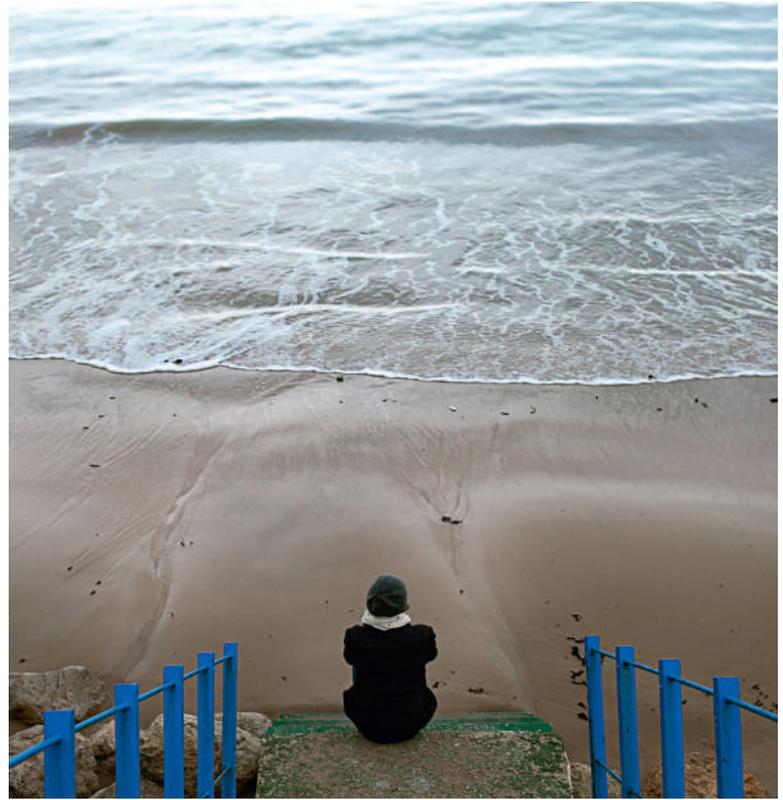
# WINTER BEACHES

THERE'S NOTHING LIKE WANDERING BY POUNDING SEA BREAKERS AND SITTING ON A WINDSWEPT CLIFFTOP TO BLOW AWAY THE COBWEBS. AFTERWARDS, HUNKER DOWN IN A PUB FOR A WELL-EARNED PINT

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Big skies reflected are an inspiring backdrop for a winter walk. Right: the sea has a way of making you feel humble and clearing your mind. Below: waves crash on the rocks at St Ives, Cornwall



PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY; CORBIS; ALAMY



The door to the Surfside Café at Caswell Bay on the Gower Peninsula bangs open as a woman with a sand-encrusted lurcher comes in. A shock of cold air and the whistle of the wind enters with her. The rest of us look up from our mugs of hot chocolate and toasted sandwiches. She is the latest walker to bowl in, hair blown by sea air, cheeks pink and eyes bright, exhilarated by her winter's stroll by the sea.

The café, packed with surfers and swimmers in the summer months, becomes a friendly and welcome pit-stop for dog walkers and ramblers in the winter. An ideal place then to end a February morning spent walking along Gower's deserted beaches.

So few people visit the British seaside in winter that it feels like a secret. Apart from a couple of dog walkers, I had been the only person walking the sandy stretch of Rhossili Bay, thick with visitors in the warmer months. Having the beach virtually to myself – the limitless horizon, the endless beach, the big sky – felt like the biggest treat. Walking steadily along, feeling the chill wind and the give of the sand beneath my boots, listening to the boom of the breakers, was so mind-clearing. All that »



### Shooting the coast

The winter coast with its softer light, absence of people, and dramatic weather conditions creates excellent photographic opportunities. Wrap up warm, keep an eye on the tides and have a Thermos handy, then point your camera at the following:

**The beach:** desolate, moody, unpopulated – perfect for wide landscape shots.

**Piers:** unoccupied and lashed by waves – haunting and evocative.

**People battling the elements:** comical and heroic, especially when photographed next to the trappings of summer.

**Wildlife:** take a zoom lens to capture seabirds, possibly seals and definitely gulls going about their business.

space! All that freedom! I wondered why no one else was there.

You have to take your chances with a visit to the seaside in winter, of course. There are days when the rain is so heavy that even the doughtiest of walkers doesn't venture out. But when weather conditions are manageable (and most are if you wear the right clothes), there are no excuses, the British seaside is always within reach: nowhere in this country is further than 70 miles from the sea.

The seaside in winter has scenery for every mood; around the peninsula from Rhossili, my walk took me along Oxwich Bay. Sheltered, the experience was more subtle, less elemental. The bright colours of summer had been replaced by subdued greys and browns, a sea fret was rolling in, kittiwakes dive-bombed the waves looking for lunch. It was a place to reflect,

to free the imagination, to feel wistful.

For maximum melancholy, of course, there is little to beat an out-of-season resort. Walk along a promenade with its boarded-up beach huts, 'closed' signs hanging outside ice-cream parlours and shut-down arcades, and you may succumb to thoughts about the transience of life and the fleetingness of pleasure.

Best to banish such thoughts, however, and instead enjoy having the place to yourself and watch the starlings come in to roost on the pier. And if the rain begins to lash or the waves crash too close to your feet, there is always the seaside café with

*“For maximum melancholy, of course, there is little to beat an out-of-season resort”*



### Winter seabird spotting

Birds from chillier climates arrive at British estuaries to feed. Look for huge flocks that put on a spectacular show.

**Knots:** watch the high tide roosts at Morecambe Bay, The Wash, Solway Firth, Humber and Dee estuaries and Strangford Lough.

**Dunlin:** they feed in large flocks in estuaries and then fly en masse to roosting grounds at high tide. The greatest numbers are on the Scottish coast.

**Barnacle geese:** thousands visit the UK from Svalbard in the Arctic. See them in the Solway Firth estuary.

**Starlings:** many starlings reside here all year but more flocks arrive in autumn from Northern Europe to spend winter here in our milder climate. Look out for murmurations around cliffs and piers (the ruined West Pier in Brighton is especially good) just before dusk as they come in to roost.

its promise of warmth, hot tea and a toastie, to restore you.

### VAST, EMPTY BEACHES

Head to any one of those enormous sandy beaches that get so crowded in summer about now and chances are that you will have it more-or-less to yourself. Bundle up in warm and waterproof clothes, pull on a pair of stout boots and set off. Once out there you will question why no one else is, especially on a crisp, sunny morning when the sea glitters and the buffeting wind fills your lungs with oxygen. This is an opportunity to walk for ages, take in gulps of clean air, and clear the head. The sand is hard and flat and there is nothing to stop you except, eventually, a satisfying tiredness. Better still, take a dog, let it off the lead and watch as it runs and runs, enjoying the freedom that limitless space brings.

**Head for:** Rhossili Bay, Gower Peninsula, Wales; St Ives Bay, Cornwall; Bamburgh Castle Beach, Northumberland; St Ouen's Bay, Jersey.

### WILD ESTUARIES AND MARSHES

Estuaries and creeks reach their atmospheric best in winter as mist rolls in and the sky is filled with the cries of wading birds, flying inland to roost. The silent, still mood is only interrupted by the clink of rigging on moored boats and the sound of your breath. If you're a fan of medieval architecture, head to Romney Marsh in Kent, where you'll find 14 churches, sitting splendid and isolated on the landscape. Keep to paths or boardwalks to avoid sinking into mud, and keep an eye open for the spirit of Magwitch from Great Expectations rising from the marsh 'soaked in water and smothered in mud'.

**Head for:** Severn Estuary; Solway Firth; Blackwater Estuary, Essex; Cuckmere Estuary, East Sussex; Romney Marsh, Kent.

### STRANGE AND MELANCHOLY SHINGLE SPITS

A coastal walk in winter is an opportunity to indulge in wistful, melancholy thoughts and nowhere is better to do this »

- ① A barge moored on Blackwater Estuary
- ② Brave surfers and the odd dog walker are the only visitors to Rhossili Bay, Gower, at this time of year
- ③ The low winter sun bathes Druridge Bay, Northumberland, in a golden light
- ④ Knots flock to UK estuaries to feed in winter



## Beachcombing

Venture out to a beach after a storm or high winds and chances are you will return with arms full of beach finds blown on shore or dislodged from cliffs. Sadly, much of this will include plastic litter, although this can be a creative opportunity: check out the work of artist Steve Macpherson ([stevemcpherson.co.uk](http://stevemcpherson.co.uk)) who makes intricate 3D mosaics from found pieces of beach plastic. Scout along the shoreline for pieces of driftwood to make into sculpture or pieces of glass buffeted by the sea to turn into jewelry. Under chalky cliffs is the best place to hunt for fossils freed by the battering of wind and rain.

than on a shingle spit.

These stretches of pebbles, banked and ridged by the sea, are great to trudge along towards the lonely lighthouse on the horizon.

The most visited is Dungeness in Kent where inhabitants live in converted railway carriages and new, architecturally-curious homes, and where Derek Jarman's house and garden, the seedheads of sea cabbage and rusted maritime wreckage provide endless photographic opportunities. Orford Ness in Suffolk can only be reached by boat

which increases the feeling of adventure, especially as the site has a fascinating – and dark – military history.

**Head for:** Dungeness, Kent; Orford Ness, Suffolk; Spurn Point; the East Riding of Yorkshire; Chesil Beach, Dorset.

## WINDSWEPT CLIFFTOPS

For lung-busting gulps of sea air, nothing beats a walk along a coastal cliff path on a winter morning. Exhilarating and invigorating in equal measure, this is where to head for views of the coastline and of the ocean stretching as far as you



### A pub to watch the waves from

Every blustery winter walk should end hunkered down in a cosy pub with a pie and a pint. Even better, the pub should be by the sea to watch storms roll in and winds whip up the waves as a fire crackles comfortingly beside you.

#### Try these:

- **The Butt and Oyster, Pin Mill, Suffolk**

At high tide, the River Orwell reaches the walls of the pub and pints have been known to be handed to sailors through the windows. [debeninns.co.uk/buttandoyster](http://debeninns.co.uk/buttandoyster)

- **Pandora Inn, Mylor, Falmouth, Cornwall**

Sitting above the Restronquet Creek, this 13th-century pub is the place to perch with a bowl of mussels and watch the tide creep in. Alternatively, wrap up warm and eat outside on the pontoon. [pandorainn.com](http://pandorainn.com)

- **The Little Gloster, Gurnard, Isle of Wight**

The generous deck looks over the Solent – sit here and watch the yachts drift past or eat in the restaurant and watch the sun set over the horizon. [thelittlegloster.com](http://thelittlegloster.com)

- **The Pilot Inn, Dungeness, Kent**

Head here after a tramp along the UK's biggest (and most atmospheric) shingle spit for fish, chips and mushy peas. [thepilotdungeness.co.uk](http://thepilotdungeness.co.uk)

- **The Harbour Inn, Solva, Pembrokeshire**

Sitting above the harbour in Solva National Park, this pub is rambler (and dog) friendly providing a comfortable stop-off along the coastal path. [harbourinnsolva.com](http://harbourinnsolva.com)

can see – depending on visibility, of course.

Take a hike along the chalk cliffs of the Seven Sisters in Sussex and you will roller-coaster up and over springy downs accompanied by the shrieks of seabirds and the thunderous pounding of waves on the rocks below.

Lack of shelter and exposure to the elements means that rugged outdoor wear is a must, as are shoes with a good tread. And it goes without saying that clifftops are probably not the place for those suffering from vertigo.

**Head for:** White Cliffs, Dover, Kent; Antrim Coast, Northern Ireland; North Devon coast; Cape Wrath, Scotland; Lizard Peninsula, Cornwall; Tennyson Down, Isle of Wight. Flamborough, East Riding of Yorkshire.

### HIGH BREAKERS AND POUNDING SURF

There is no better place to experience the might of a winter storm than by the sea. Watch its progress across the ocean as curtains of rain sheet down, the thunder

*“Experience the thrill of the surf pounding on the shore or into rocky coves while dodging the tide”*

rumbles closer and the wind whips up the waves. Watch lightning illuminate entire bays as it jackknives across the sky. Then experience the thrill of the surf pounding on the shore or into rocky coves while dodging the tide as it hurtles towards you.

The best storm-watching sites are often the best surfing beaches – waves that in the summer provide the perfect ripcurl for surfers reach massive, and unsurfable, dimensions in the winter. Head to Cornwall, Devon and the east coast of Scotland for maximum awesomeness.

**Head for:** Thurso East, Caithness, Scotland; Freshwater West, Pembrokeshire; Sennen Cove, Cornwall; Croyde, North Devon.

*Clare Gogerty is the author of The National Trust book of the Coast (National Trust Books)* 

- 1 Wild and windswept Dunluce Castle, North Antrim Coast
- 2 Collect pebbles and create your own land art
- 3 Crashing waves at Sennen Cove, Cornwall
- 4 An abandoned boat in eerie Dungeness